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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [IS](#) [KPAL](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 MPS ANXIOUS OVER ARAB LEAGUE  
SUMMIT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Still determined and tough in their rhetoric, ten of the March 14 MPs taking refuge in Beirut hotels since the September 2007 assassination of their colleague MP Antoine Ghanem told the Charge that Lebanon should follow suit if Saudi Arabia and Egypt choose not to send a delegation to the March 29-30 Arab League summit. However, if the Saudis and Egyptians send a lower level delegation, the MPs believe Lebanon should send a delegation headed by a Christian, rejecting the possibilities of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora or Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri leading a delegation.

2. (C) Reacting to the recent Israeli incursion into Gaza, the MPs said that a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is critical to improving U.S. relations with the Arab/Muslim world. The MPs also explained why they oppose a return to the 1960 electoral law, which they claim would disadvantage the Christians. End summary.

3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by DCM and PolOffs, visited the March 14 MPs at the Lahoya Hotel on March 3. A group of March 14 MPs live in the hotel, with strict security, to protect themselves against assassination attempts that have claimed some of their March 14 colleagues. Others spend most of their time abroad. Ten MPs attended the luncheon: Mohammad Qabbani, Ammar Hourri, Badr Wannous, Serge Torsarkissian, Azzam Dandashi, Hadi Hobeich, Riad Rahhal, Elie Aoun, Moustapha Allouch, and Mahmoud Mourad. Seemingly in good spirits despite their six-month long confinement in the Lahoya and earlier in another hotel, the group demonstrated unity in their thinking, and a continued dedication to their role as MPs and to electing a president. They also sense an impending change in the region, which could affect Lebanon's political impasse.

PARTICIPATION AT ARAB LEAGUE  
SUMMIT SHOULD BE LIMITED

4. (C) The March 14 MPs had spent the morning making the rounds at Arab League embassies, pleading Lebanon's case in the face of the upcoming March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus. They reported that the embassies' representatives were "diplomatic" in that they were sympathetic to the Lebanese interest, but the MPs fear their countries will act passively with Syria at the summit. The MPs also expressed

dissatisfaction that the U.S. was not tough enough on Syria, despite the recent designation against Syrian businessman Rami Maklouf or the presence of the US Navy ships off the Lebanese coast.

15. (C) Reacting to the recent Israeli incursion into Gaza, several of the MPs confessed that while they are proud of their ties to the U.S., its relationship with Israel causes them to feel ashamed. "You ask, why do they (Arabs) hate us?", they continued, arguing that if there was a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. would have many more friends. One MP believed a just resolution of the conflict would eliminate 90% of Osama bin Laden's support. (Comment: While we hear statements supporting the Palestinians regularly, they generally come across as perfunctory; the March 14 MP's remarks on this occasion were stated with greater conviction. End comment.)

16. (C) The MPs stressed that the Palestinian issue should top the summit's agenda. After the Palestinian issue, the summit should focus on Lebanon and Iraq. Commenting that Lebanon had yet to receive its own invitation to the summit, they pondered whether Lebanon should attend, since attendance legitimizes Syria's actions, and concluded that they should follow Saudi Arabia's and Egypt's lead. They recommended that the summit be held outside Syria.

17. (C) The mixed group of Sunni and Christian MPs unanimously recommended that if Saudi Arabia and Egypt send a lower level delegation because no president is elected in Lebanon, and Lebanon participates, then Lebanon should send a Christian-led delegation to Damascus. Rejecting the option of sending delegations led by Muslims Prime Minister Fouad Siniora or Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, they thought it would be symbolically valuable to send a Christian, since the

desired delegate -- the president -- would be Christian. They said that local protocol practice would make Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr the first choice, followed by Minister Nayla Mouawad, who would take precedence over other ministers since she is also a former First Lady. The MPs favored sending Mouawad, who is a Maronite Christian, instead of Murr, who is Greek Orthodox.

ELECTORAL REFORM NECESSARY;  
NO VIABLE SOLUTION PROPOSED  
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18. (C) MP Mohammad Qabbani provided an historical account of how electoral law has shifted since the 1960 law was in effect, recounting that the impetus to change the law was the belief that the electoral system was the root of the civil war. He gave the example that in a predominately Christian qada (district), the level of competition among the Christian candidates meant that the most aggressive, outspoken (against Muslims) candidate prevailed. The idea of redistricting to create large, multi-confessional areas came about to encourage the election of more moderate MPs. However, the movement to change was sidelined by the 1990 Gulf War and Syrian occupation.

19. (C) The MPs unequivocally dismissed the so-called Boutros law, a proposed electoral law based on a system of small districts, deeming it too complicated and impossible to execute. While recognizing that some changes were necessary, they tended to favor the current system under the 2000 law, because it advantages March 14 Christians.

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